

From Betty Coerber, Evans Elementary School, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin—

Adopt-A-Ship: Motivating, Enriching, Challenging

Students at Evans Elementary School in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, recently celebrated 29 years in the Adopt-A-Ship Program. The Adopt-A-Ship Program has been a mainstay for us all these 29 years. It provides an experience the shipmates (the students) carry with them throughout their lives.

Although most students at Evans School have never been aboard ship, they are well-versed in nautical terms, navigation problems, storms at sea, trade routes, imports, exports, cargo handling, and the history, geography, economics, climate, education, and culture of the countries and ports of call their vessels have visited.

The shipmates love corresponding with their adopted ship, her officers, and crew. Not infrequently, I have been told by the shipmates, "I have been waiting since kindergarten to become a shipmate." Graduates of the Adopt-A-Ship Program at Evans consider it a highlight of their educational career. Parents enrolling their kindergarten children will inquire of our principal, James Botting, about the program, stating it is "an experience they so enjoyed they'd like it for their children."

The Program motivates, enriches, and teaches in a way that can't be accomplished by ordinary textbooks. At Evans we have used the correspondence from our adopted ship captains and officers in every subject area across the curriculum from the core subjects to fine arts and technology.

The shipmates' faces beam with pride and excitement upon learning that we have an e-mail or a package from our captain. In a matter of minutes, our excitement and joy are relayed to the whole school. Shortly, students will be seen pouring over encyclopedias, atlases, and other reference books to help them solve the research problem the captain sent. Not too long ago, they even involved their parents with the math problem sent by the captain, "How many top-quality tulip bulbs can be carried in a 40-foot container?"

The excitement goes on and on each day as the shipmates discuss and plot the ship's course on our classroom map. I often wish the captain and 2nd officers could hear these discussions. They would beam with pride on what their shipmates ashore have learned from their letters and are now practicing.

The program also has stimulated the shipmates to take a keen interest in world events and happenings in countries where our ship calls. Upon hearing in the news that some ship libraries needed help, the Evans shipmates had an all-school paperback book collection to send on to the ship. They collected thousands of paperbacks and got our entire city involved to help with the expenses involved.

For many of the shipmates today, the interest conveyed in the letters and e-mails provides them with a sense of importance and self-worth that motivates them to do their best each day. Their captain truly cares about them and has made them feel very special. I recall a shipmate telling me, "This is the first letter I ever received in my whole life." The desire to participate in the program has motivated incoming shipmates who in previous years spent many hours on the bench outside the principal's office to be exemplary students and model citizens.

The learning, the challenges of nautical math and charting, the sea lore, the nautical poetry and sea chanteys, down to learning the importance and rewards of written communication have made the Adopt-A-Ship Program memorable and never to be forgotten by the Evans shipmates.

While the captain and officers on the ship share their experiences at sea and answer countless questions, the shipmates share their interests, experiences, school life, and daily joys and sorrows in return. Not infrequently they ask for solutions to problems such as "How can I explain detention to my parents to escape being grounded?" or "Could you help me with some answers for my Social Studies/Science project?"

As our ship made its way around the world each year, we did a culminating activity to share back what we learned from her traversing the seven seas and many different ports of call and countries of the world. The shipmates became ecstatic upon learning that their captains would, in fact, really come and visit for their culminating activity. All hands were on deck after school, before school, at recess, and even on weekends to build and paint stage props, scenery, or whatever was needed for the program. Speaking parts were memorized, practiced, and polished. The excitement of meeting, visiting with, and entertaining their captain ashore was an unforgettable experience for all.